

His world was a simple one, consisting of only three things. The darkness, so impenetrable that one could easily doubt that anything else even existed. The cold, which was as complete and uncaringly harsh as the inky black which he hung suspended within. The last and worst of the three, were the screams.

The darkness and the cold he could endure. The screams, however, were an all-consuming nightmare that he would give anything to escape. They varied in intensity; sometimes loud enough that he thought they would deafen him, and at other times so soft and faint that he had to strain to hear them, almost as if they were whispers.

He couldn't be sure, but he suspected that they were echoes of his own.

There was no way to tell how long he had been here; he could not remember. There were memories, of course, recollections of his past, musings of his present and maybe even one or two visions of his currently dubious future. It was all a bit of a jumble in his mind and it gave him almost as much of a headache trying to sort through it all as listening to the screams did.

It was confusing. The memories --his memories, he reminded himself-- were jumping around like a daggit on a sunspot. Images, moments of his life, streamed past his mind's eye one by one for seconds or minutes at a time before splintering into a thousand shards and progressing on to the next scene.

As this was happening he became aware of... something. Something new, but familiar at the same time. Sensations. The feelings and emotions associated with those memories he was reliving, what he had experienced at the time. Quite suddenly these recollections of his life began to be much more important to him as he experienced something more than the simple intellectual curiosity he had regarded them with before.

Desire coursed through him, a need to experience more of these feelings, a need to experience them first hand, rather than vicariously through his memories. It was such a rich sensation, to feel alive like this after such a long time --as least he thought it had been a long time-- that the impenetrable darkness was just as suddenly not as limitless as it had seemed before.

Now it was smothering, choking him with its blackness as he struggled to free himself from its chill grip. The more he struggled, the more stifling its hold on him seemed to become. He fought against it, tooth and nail, but nothing seemed to work against it. It was simply darkness after all, completely insubstantial and unaffected by anything he did.

The only thing his efforts succeeded in changing were the screams. They were growing louder with each passing moment. Louder and so much clearer and more intelligible than they had been earlier. It was a horrifying sound now, the sound of dying souls. Tortured souls. Damned souls. It just went on and on until he couldn't take it any more.

He threw back his head and screamed.

"Hold him down! Hold him down, dammit, he's convulsing! If you don't hold him down he's going to hurt himself!"

"Hurt *himself*? Bloody hell, Gladys, he broke both of Marty's arms! I somehow don't think it's him we should be worrying about!"

"I don't care! Hold him down!"

"How? We can't stun him, we can't body bind him - not in this condition!"

"Use your bloody hands, you twits!"

The screams were gone now, save his own. Dimly, between his screams and the pounding of his heartbeat in his ears, he could make out voices. They were shouting urgently, a different sound to the screams, and by all rights should have calmed him down, but they did not, they could not. He was consumed by his panicked need to

escape the confines of the darkness which still seemed to cling to him. He thrashed and bucked his body in an attempt to finally break loose, but other forces were trying to hold him down, trying to keep him imprisoned.

"Gods, he's strong! This is like riding a Aethonian with a thorn in its hoof!"

"He's legs! Look out for hi -- ooph!"

He was finding it easier to fight back now, his mind had rediscovered his limbs and was learning how to feel what they felt and command them to move as he wanted them to move. He had been trapped in the darkness for too long and his body was weak from disuse. His screams tapered off and were replaced by growls and snarls as he struggled against foes he could not see. The darkness still engulfed most of his senses. He could hear and feel, to a degree, but his eyes were still swathed in inky blackness that only served to fuel his continuing panic.

"Watch out! He's using his teeth!"

"Really? I hadn't noticed!"

"For Merlin's sake, don't let him bite you!"

By now he had stopped snarling, partly because it was tiring and he wanted to save his breath, but mostly because he was interested in hearing what the voices were saying. Some of their words meshed with images of places and people from his memory, but it was still too disjointed for him to understand properly. His struggles did not cease, however, as he was not about to surrender his fight against the darkness.

Indeed he believed he was making some progress in escaping, though this was mostly a subconscious observation as the bulk of his concentration was focused on his struggle. There was perhaps the faintest of lights beginning to emerge from the black which he was fighting against. It flittered about the edges of his vision, mostly pinks and reds, but occasionally a flash of orange or yellow or (even rarer) a burst of brilliant white.

"Dammit, Miriam, cast the bleeding Calming Charm already!"

"I already have! Twice!"

"Well, I don't think it's working that well!"

The light was becoming stronger and starting to briefly form shapes that were vaguely definable. It would seem that his efforts were paying off, his vision was beginning to return as were the remainder of his senses. He could now feel the hands pressing down on him, trying to restrain him. He could smell the sweat in the air from his exertions, and the bitter tang of blood from some source he could not identify, though he knew it was not his.

"Gah! Where the hell's Strout?! He's supposed to be *her* patient!"

"At Hogwarts! Death Eaters attacked the Express - Dumbledore and the Ministry've called in every Healer they can spare to help with the casualties!"

"You mean we're it?"

"Yes!"

"Crap!"

"Hey, look! Look! He's calming down!"

"Well, he couldn't possibly get any more agitated."

It was, he reflected much later, an experience that must have been very much like being born. His entire body heaved upright, so that he was almost sitting up as he sucked in a deep, gasping breath. It filled his lungs, the air burning his throat and insides as he gulped in breath after breath, each one feeling like his first. His eyes sprung open, wide and staring. A group of about five or six anxious looking witches and wizards stared right back at him.

Then, as quickly as it had come to him, his strength deserted him. His muscles, which had been drawn taut suddenly seemed to liquefy, the burning sensations that filled them changing into a dull throbbing

numbness. He tried to speak, to protest the sudden onset of this weakness, but his body was unable to respond to his demands. Instead he collapsed back on the bed he had been lying on, unable to support himself any longer. He couldn't even raise his head to look around at his surroundings and his eyelids were becoming increasingly heavy.

"Merlin's beard! That son of a bitch just scared a dozen years off me!"

"Who cares? You're young enough to have some to spare."

"You're only a year older than me, you--"

"Shut up and let's get to work," interrupted a voice that seemed closer than the others. As he struggled to keep his eyes open and not to fall back into the darkness, a face suddenly filled his sight. It was a witch, a bit older than the others in the room, and she was looking down at him with a mixed expression of worry and relief. She began waving her wand over him, casting spells of some sort, but not loud or clear enough for him to make out exactly what they were.

"What on earth is going on here?" asked a new voice, one he had not heard before, though it was vaguely familiar to him. "What was all that racket I heard - all the way from the elevator, I might add?"

One of the wizards, one whose nose appeared to be broken, tried to explain. "He dos habbing conbulshins, Mabim Shtwoupt."

He could hear Mabin Shtwoupt, or Madam Strout as he supposed her name would be pronounced by someone whose nose wasn't bent at a near ninety degree angle, bustle up to the bed he was lying on. She appeared above him, standing next to the much younger witch that was still tending to him. She looked very familiar and, for some reason he couldn't place, reminded him a great deal of Professor Sprout, who taught Herbology at Hogwarts.

He tried to speak to her, to ask what exactly was going on, but his body was completely exhausted. His muscles were burning and quivering, giving him the appearance of someone that was shivering rather badly, even though he was anything but cold. His skin felt too tight for his body and prickled uncomfortably when he moved, not that

he could. It felt as if he had a rather mild sunburn, which was a stark contrast to the biting cold he had experienced in the darkness.

"Any idea what caused this?" Strout was asking the others, now waving her own wand over his chest.

The younger witch, whom he thought was probably called Miriam, shrugged expressively and said, "Sorry, Madam, but we really don't know. He just started screaming about half an hour ago, it was Marty that heard him first."

Strout looked around the room. "And where is Martin?"

Someone he could not see answered, "Well, uh, both his arms are broken."

"Amb by dose!"

"Excuse me?" Strout looked rather surprised for a moment. Then she glanced between him and the others in the room, clearly noticing their battered appearance for the first time. She looked down at him, eyebrows cresting her hairline, and said, "I wouldn't have believed him capable of putting up such a struggle."

"We must have cast half a dozen Calming and Relaxation Charm on him," muttered someone.

Strout looked even more surprised and peering closely at him, examining his eyes closely. "Half a dozen? I'm frankly amazed that he's still conscious. He should be out like a light."

Miriam shook her head. "I don't think even a Stunner would have stopped him."

Strout frowned and muttered to herself, just loudly enough for Miriam and him to hear, "Damnation, I wish we could call in Potter to have a look at him. He's the only person I know that seemed to have even the vaguest idea of what was going on here."

"Why can't you call him, Madam?" asked Miriam. "I know he might be busy --Gladys and I heard about the attack on the Hogwarts Express

over the Wireless-- but I'm sure he'll be available after a day or two's rest."

"I'm afraid not, child," responded Strout, her lips thinning to a fine and unhappy line. Her expression darkened as she elaborated, "Mister Potter will not be available any time in the future."

"Why's that?" asked one of the wizards, who he could just see with in peripheral vision.

Madam Strout shook her head mournfully and he was surprised to see tears beginning to form in her eyes. The old witch drew in a deep, shuddering breath, and explained, "The Death Eater attack was perfectly planned. They set up an Anti-Apparation ward around the spot on the tracks where they attacked. Nobody was able to send a call for help and even if they had, nobody would have been able to answer it."

Miriam looked puzzled and asked, "But, we heard..."

"That we won?" Strout looked sharply at the younger witch. "Yes, child, we won. But at a great price. Perhaps, too great a price."

"You don't mean? No, it's can't be?"

"I'm afraid so, Miriam, I'm afraid so."

His hold on consciousness as beginning to slip, he was simply too fatigued to fight against it anymore. But he clung to the waking world for as long as he could. This was something he wanted to hear.

"Harry Potter... the Boy Who Lived... is dead."

His last thought, before slipping back into oblivion, was a triumphant one.

*I did it.*

TBC...

